

May 16, 1977

Dear Mr. Atukorala,

It was heartening to receive your nice Dhamma letter. I am happy that the contact with all the Dhamma friends of Sri Lanka can go on, even after we have left. I sure hope to return to your country. I am thinking of Sri Lanka every day.

I will first repeat your questions one and three:

Was the Buddha a Hindu? If so could you please tell me why he did not take to Hinduism if he was born Hindu?

Are Hinduism and Buddhism not very like religions?

When we hear the word Hinduism we are inclined to think of one uniform kind of belief. But when we read the 'Brahma-Gāla' suttā and also other suttas we learn that there were many speculative theories people were clinging to. In the valley of the Ganges there were many gurus who had their pupils and were teaching different beliefs and different ascetical practices, some of which were very extravagant. People were speculating about the world, about the soul, whether world and soul were eternal or not, or whether the soul would be annihilated after death or not. There were many kinds of wrong view. However, some gurus taught the development of wholesomeness, of samatha-bhāvanā. Samatha-bhāvanā is a way to have more kusala instead of akusala. But samatha cannot eradicate wrong view and other defilements.

Since there were very many teachers and many beliefs it is hard to tell what we mean by Hinduism. The Buddha's parents, King Sudhodana and Queen Maya, may have followed the customs of that time but it is not known whether they listened to certain teachers. Another reason why I would not like to say that the Buddha was born a Hindu is that he was the Bodhisatta and was born mindful and clearly conscious after he had fulfilled all the perfections during innumerable lives. He was not clinging to a certain speculative theory, he was a seeker of the truth. He developed Samatha under his teachers Alara the Kalama and Uddaka. Samatha was the highest form of kusala which could be cultivated. The Buddha then found the Path all by himself which leads to the eradication of all defilements. And he taught others as well to see realities as they are, so that wrong view and other defilements can be eradicated.

What is the meaning of this last sentence? The Buddha teaches us the eightfold Path, but we have to develop it ourselves. He taught about seeing, visible object, hearing, sound, anger, attachment and all realities which appear in daily life. We have to become seekers of the truth and discover more about these realities.

There is seeing now. It is not self who sees, seeing is a conditioned reality: visible object and eye-sense are conditions for the arising of seeing. Seeing does not stay, it falls away. Seeing is the experience of visible object. Visible object is what appears

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through the eyes. When we close our eyes, no visible object. When we open them there is visible object. It will take maybe many more lives before we clearly know what seeing is, what visible object is, it may take many lives before we see things as they really are. But since the Buddha taught about realities which appear time and again, which appear now, we can begin to study them with mindfulness. This is the only way leading to the eradication of wrong view. Have you ever heard of any other teaching which teaches realities appearing now, right now? That is why one cannot compare the Buddhist teachings with any other kind of belief. That is the reason why we don't have to call it Buddhism. Other teachings teach only about concepts and ideas which are made up by the mind but which are not real, appearing now, through one of the six doors. This answers also your third question.

We read in the Gradual Sayings, Book of the Ones, Ch. XIII, par. 3:

Monks, one person born into the world is an extraordinary man. What person? A Tathāgata who is Arahāt, a fully Enlightened One. He is the one person.

Soul, person, world, brain, tree, are concepts. We can think about them, but they are not realities (paramattha dhammas) which can be directly experienced. Right now hardness may appear. When there is a short moment of mindfulness of just the hardness, not mixed with concepts, such as hardness of my body, or hardness of the chair, it is a beginning to study the reality of hardness. There cannot be the experience of hardness at the same time as the experience of sound. Sound appears through the ear-door. Sound is quite different from hardness. Realities appear one at a time through the different doorways. The doorway of the ear has nothing to do with the body-door. Different realities appearing at different moments.

The study of the Abhidhamma can be very fruitful so long as we remember that it is the study of realities appearing now. When we only read about them, we will not know them. Reading is not enough. It is one thing to read about attachment, but when it appears now, just after seeing, or hearing, what then? Then it should be known as it is, a conditioned reality. And we will see how difficult it is to know its characteristic precisely, right at the moment it appears. When we help someone, else there is mettā, but there is also, at different moments, bound to be attachment; attachment to the person we help, or to ourselves and our good deed. What is the characteristic of mettā exactly and what the characteristic of attachment? Do we know those different moments, not merely in theory, but by direct experience, without any doubt?

It is the same when we are in the shrine-room, is there also attachment, or conceit? There's bound to be. Those moments should

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be known too, otherwise we think that we are good all the time, while actually there are many moments of akusala. It is dangerous to take for kusala what is akusala. The more different moments we discover, the better. It is the way to know ourselves better. The teachings are really marvellous. Without the teachings we could so easily mislead ourselves. We read in the 'Gradual Sayings', Book of the Fours, Ch. XIII, par. 8, Marvels: -

Monks, on the manifestation of a Tathāgata... four wonderful marvellous things are manifested. What four?

Monks, folk take pleasure in the habitual (sense-pleasures), delight in the habitual, are excited thereby. But when Dhamma contrary to such is taught by a Tathāgata, folk are ready to hear it, they lend an ear, they apply their minds thereto... Monks, folk take pleasure in pride... folk take pleasure in excitement...

Monks, folk are come to ignorance, are become blinded, overcast by ignorance. But when Dhamma controlling ignorance is taught by a Tathāgata, they are ready to hear it, they lend an ear to it, they apply their minds thereto. This, monks is the fourth wonderful, marvellous thing manifested when a Tathāgata, Arahant, a Fully Enlightened One is manifested....

The Dhamma is really able to change people's characters.

Your second question: Do Hindus believe in rebirth? According to this religion is it that the 'Atma' is reborn.

This is correct. It is quite different from the Buddha's teaching. In order to understand what the Buddha teaches about rebirth: what about this moment? Does it stay? Moments of consciousness succeed one another. One moment falls away and it conditions the next moment. There is seeing, but it does not stay, it is succeeded by a next moment. Cittas arise and fall away, succeeding one another. How can we take any citta for self. Where is the self? There are conditions for a next citta, and a next citta and thus, life goes on, but the next citta is quite different from this moment, thus, no self. Each moment there is birth and death of citta. So, what happens at what we call in conventional terms the end of our life, is not different from what happens right now. The last citta falls away and it is succeeded by the next citta, which is the first citta of the next life. Kamma conditions the rūpa in the next life, and afterwards also citta, temperature and food condition rūpa. It also depends on kamma in which plane there is rebirth. The more we understand the present moment the more we will understand rebirth. 'Life is only in one moment,' Khun Sujin said. One moment and then gone. Seeing is life, hearing is life, smelling is

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life, tasting is life, touching is life, experiencing objects through the mind-door is life. The next life? In the five khandha plane: seeing, hearing, thinking, etc. Once this life will become past life, nothing special about it. That is why it is not helpful to speculate about past lives or next lives. It is better to know the present moment. Isn't that difficult enough? Hard, but if we do not begin now it will always be difficult.

I am glad you like to study Abhidhamma and read suttas. It is helpful to read all suttas, not just a few. If we only read a few we may think that the Buddha told everyone to go to the forest. Or that it is necessary to develop samatha first before satipatthana. This is not so. No rule at all. Any reality which appears now should be studied with mindfulness. In daily life. No need to go to a special place. Isn't there attachment now? It can be object of awareness. Isn't there visible object now, no matter we are in the shrine room or outside? It can be object of awareness.

The next few weeks I will be writing my impressions about Sri Lanka. It is my thank-you letter to the people of Sri Lanka. I will send a copy to Mr. Richard Abeysekera.